Proving ground

Alison Secrest

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.rit.edu/theses

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Thesis/Dissertation Collections at RIT Scholar Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of RIT Scholar Works. For more information, please contact ritscholarworks@rit.edu.
PROVING GROUND

By

ALISON SECREST

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Art in Imaging Arts

Rochester Institute of Technology

Myra Greene

Dan Larkin

Jessica Lieberman

November 8, 2006
Thesis/Dissertation Author Permission Statement

Title of thesis or dissertation: Proving Ground

Name of author: Alison Secrest
Degree: Master of Fine Arts
Program: Imaging Arts
College: College of Imaging Arts

I understand that I must submit a print copy of my thesis or dissertation to the RIT Archives, per current RIT guidelines for the completion of my degree. I hereby grant to the Rochester Institute of Technology and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive and make accessible my thesis or dissertation in whole or in part in all forms of media in perpetuity. I retain all other ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis or dissertation. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis or dissertation.

Print Reproduction Permission Granted:

I, Alison Secrest, hereby grant permission to the Rochester Institute Technology to reproduce my print thesis or dissertation in whole or in part. Any reproduction will not be for commercial use or profit.

Signature of Author: Alison Secrest          Date: 11/8/06

Print Reproduction Permission Denied:

I, _______________, hereby deny permission to the RIT Library of the Rochester Institute of Technology to reproduce my print thesis or dissertation in whole or in part.

Signature of Author: ___________________ Date: __________

Inclusion in the RIT Digital Media Library Electronic Thesis & Dissertation (ETD) Archive

I, Alison Secrest, additionally grant to the Rochester Institute of Technology Digital Media Library (RIT DML) the non-exclusive license to archive and provide electronic access to my thesis or dissertation in whole or in part in all forms of media in perpetuity.

I understand that my work, in addition to its bibliographic record and abstract, will be available to the world-wide community of scholars and researchers through the RIT DML. I retain all other ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis or dissertation. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis or dissertation. I am aware that the Rochester Institute of Technology does not require registration of copyright for ETDs.

I hereby certify that, if appropriate, I have obtained and attached written permission statements from the owners of each third party copyrighted matter to be included in my thesis or dissertation. I certify that the version I submitted is the same as that approved by my committee.

Signature of Author: Alison Secrest          Date: 11/8/06
Acknowledgments

It was with the utmost gratitude that I would like to thank Myra Greene, my thesis committee chair, and committee members, Dan Larkin and Jessica Lieberman. It was with their help, guidance, and unbridled support that this thesis project was able to be realized.

It was with the guidance of other faculty that I was also able to push myself with this project. I would like to thank Therese Mulligan, Jeff Weiss, Elliott Rubenstein, and Willie Osterman for all of their assistance.

I would also like to express my greatest gratitude to my family and to Kurt Zeller; for seeing me through times more trying and being the pillars for my encouragement and support.
PROVING GROUND

By

ALISON SECREST

B.A., Art, Mixed Media, Western Washington University, 2001
M.F.A., Imaging Arts, Rochester Institute of Technology, 2006

ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to explain and explore the work in Proving Ground, the thesis exhibition that accompanies this written thesis. The exhibition consists of an installation titled Proving Ground, a series of photographs titled All New Materials, and a series of small sculpture titled New Evolutions.

The installation Proving Ground is a set of life size animals; a cow, deer, and two smaller creatures that reference Romulus and Remus. The cow and the deer are made out of paper mache and discarded stuffed animals. Romulus and Remus are made out of paper mache and horse hair. It is in this installation that the foundation myth of Rome is explored and well as transmutation and genetic mutations that can occur from nuclear fallout.

The photographs All New Materials seek to investigate the transformation of materials from discarded stuffed animals to animal hides. In the photographs the materiality of the project is at play.

The sculptures New Evolutions showcase playfulness in the materials of the mutated stuffed animals. The sculptures exhibit possible transformations and evolutions of the creatures in the fictitious Proving Ground.

Artists of influence in this work include Matthew Ritchie, Trenton Doyle Hancock, Kara Walker, Annette Messager, Vik Muniz, Peter Goin, and Emmitt Gowin.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1  Introduction ......................................................... 5
Chapter 2  History .......................................................... 8
Chapter 3  Mythology ......................................................... 13
Chapter 4  Proving Ground .................................................. 17
Chapter 5  Materiality ........................................................ 20
Chapter 6  Conclusion ......................................................... 25
Bibliography ................................................................. 26
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Documentation dating back to pre-colonial Native American tribes demonstrates how herds of buffalo thrived in the land between tribal factions. These tribes were afraid to cross their territory boundaries for fear of their lives – leaving buffer zones on the maps that had been drawn and allowing animals to thrive in these in-between places. It is in the same manner that Demilitarized Zones exist. Currently a Demilitarized Zone exists between North and South Korea that is full of vibrant and exotic species of animal and plant life due to tense relations between the nations and the prolifery of landmines keeping most human activity outside.

A DMZ is a place that is both enclosed by the confines of man and holds an amazing amount of freedom for the life that does reside in these spaces. Imagine a space such as between North and South Korea where nuclear testing occurs and leaves its invisible fingerprint on the land. No man will enter the landscape for fear of his own life and so a parallel evolution of species is able to progress and thrive.

It is in looking at different land sites that the project, Proving Ground, comes to life. The DMZ provides the ideal backdrop for this contemporary story. A DMZ is founded on the principal of war – the effects of which go unnoticed in this land as humans will not enter it. With the DMZ as the setting, my interest in nuclear polluted land becomes the inspiration for the story. My personal history is the impetus for the part of the project. I grew up in Richland, Washington – which was founded in top secret during the Manhattan Project to develop the plutonium for the bomb. Past and present day health effects ravage the land and its people and give notice to unnatural mutation of
the body. These mutations of the body were of concern during the time the bomb was being developed and were tested at different ‘Proving Grounds’ across the country. Both the study of the transformation and mutations of material were tested upon animals and the land the bombs were being dropped on.

The installation titled *Proving Ground* leads to elements of theatricality by enveloping and engaging the viewer inside a constructed space. A narrative emerges as threads from the various pieces begin to intertwine. The use of various media in the installation includes sculpture and photographs to illustrate a selected scene from this new cosmology.

The pieces presented for the Visual Studies Workshop are comprised of a sculptural installation and a series of photographs. The sculptural installation *Proving Ground* is loosely modeled after a natural history museum display. Life size animals made out of non-traditional materials fill the space and encourage a dialogue with the photographs of the stuffed animals turned into animal hides placed in proximity.

It is here that my interest in blurring the line between fact and fiction takes place and a new mythology will be constructed. The cow becomes the central figure in this myth – a creature commonly known as passive and one that nourishes others. When grazing the land that has been contaminated with toxins the cow concentrates the poison in its milk that will nurture new life – allowing rapid unforeseen mutations to occur. These mutations create a new hierarchy of species and strata of behavioral systems emerge. Breathing new life into discarded stuffed animals and transmutating them into new species conveys the story of this fabricated reality. These animals also open up
points of entry into the story for the viewer with their beautiful and strange aesthetic qualities.

The artwork engages in content loaded with environmental and sociological implications while it is not implicitly political. *Proving Ground* is a meditation on the collision of various ideologies where variances emerge as dictated by the viewer. The remediation of materials in this installation collides with contemporary culture by subverting the ethos of consumer culture as evidenced in the use of discarded materials that have been reconfigured to construct a new mythology.
CHAPTER 2: HISTORY

"Because of the secrecy surrounding nuclear weapons production, the public did not know much about Hanford's operational details until 1986. By February of that year, citizen pressure had forced the U.S. Department of Energy to release 19,000 pages of Hanford historical documents that had been previously unavailable to the public. These pages revealed there had been huge releases of radioactive materials into the environment that contaminated the Columbia River and more than 75,000 square miles of land. Many people were outraged at the four decades of secrecy and deception. They felt their own government had betrayed them. They demanded to know how the government could have kept such dangers secret for so long.

The documents revealed that Hanford was key to U.S. participation in the nuclear arms race. In 1943, the federal government had selected Hanford as the site for the world's first large-scale nuclear production plant. Hanford produced the plutonium for the bomb dropped on Nagasaki, Japan, during World War 2. About half of all U.S. nuclear weapons were made with plutonium from Hanford. Hanford officials cited national security considerations as a justification for the secrecy (Hanford Health Information Network 1996)."

My own personal history is deeply invested in the topic of the construction of the atomic bomb. I grew up in Richland, Washington – home to Hanford Works, a top-secret component to the Manhattan Project that developed plutonium for Fat Man, the bomb that was dropped on Nagasaki. Outside of Chernobyl, Richland is currently the most nuclear polluted site in the world. The city boasts a strange pride in conjunction with its history and a silence with the current state of the environment and welfare of the people.

It is in the silence that this event is given that a mythical status is created surrounding it. The devastation and destruction incurred are beyond comprehension. Even the transformation of matter caused by the bomb is not possible to imagine but are evidenced in the mutations of humans and animals exposed to its affects.

I use elements of this history in combination with reference to Roman mythology and an interest in consumer culture as placing value (an intangible medium) onto tangible
objects. With these ideas I am in the process of creating a new mythology that parallels our own in many ways.

Growing up in the Richland/Hanford Township in Eastern Washington State I learned in my 6th grade class how nuclear reactors work. We were also told legends that other people have about 'us' and how to rebut these claims in clear and concise sentences. For instance, we were told that some people have the notion that we could glow in the dark and are radioactive from exposure to the radiation pollution. While obviously not being able to glow in the dark, our response is to say, "everyone is radioactive."

By birthplace I became interested in things nuclear. The mascot for the high school was the 'bomber' - a formidable character who walks the fields of the sports games in an aviation suit and carries a bomb on his shoulder. An emblem of a mushroom cloud is tiled into the entranceway and is a source of school pride. A hazing ritual is making the incoming freshmen clean the cloud with a toothbrush.

While employed at a bagel shop during high school I worked with a number of women in their 50's who had grown up in the township. I began to notice similar health ailments in the women, particularly problems with their thyroid and Lupus, an autoimmune disease where the body attacks itself - these ailments (mutations of the body), along with escalated cancer rates, are common in this community.

Environmental impact, affecting the health and genetic makeup of those living in a particular place at a particular time, began to peak my interest. By purposefully polluting the land in order to test the affects on humans and other living species such as the Green Run experiment, which occurred on December 2, 1949.
“Green Run” refers to a secret U.S. Air Force experiment at Hanford that released somewhere between 7,000 and 12,000 curies of iodine-131 (in comparison – the Three Mile Island accident released 15 – 24 curies of iodine-131; pg. 4 – pamphlet – the release of radioactive...) to the air.... The experiment was called the Green Run because it involved a processing “run” of uranium fuel that had been cooled for only a short time (16 days), and was, therefore, “green.” The normal proactive in 1949 was to cool the fuel 90 to 100 days before processing. The longer cooling time allows for radiation, especially iodine-131, to decay to lower levels. The reported purpose of the Green Run was to test monitoring equipment the Air Force was developing for its intelligence activities concerning the Soviet Union’s nuclear weapons program (pg. 3 – pamphlet – the release of radioactive...)

“The question of whether the Green Run was a radiological warfare experiment, designed to test harm to foodstuffs and living creatures, is still open. However, according to many early H.I. scientists, the real purpose of the Green Run was not to see how damaging would be the dissolving of metal cooled such a short time nor to determine whether such a brief cooling period could be used safely to speed plutonium production. H.I. scientists already knew, from their experiences, that such a dissolving would produce extremely high amounts of radioactivity in the off-gases (Gerber 2002).”

With an instance such as the Green Run, which occurred in 1949, but was kept a government secret until 1980, breeds mistrust with many of the people living in the area. Why the government has not taken accountability for the sicknesses and abnormal cancer rates that plague the area is a permanent question in the minds of many residents. There is also a strange pride that inhabits the area as well. Perhaps it is the rurality of the area mixed with the importance given to it during the wartime effort and not fully recognized until the 1980’s.

Animals were placed near the bomb test sites in New Mexico in order to study the effects of the devastation and the fallout post explosion. The animals that survived started to grow white patches of fur on the hides and their offspring showed genetic mutations. Future generations of these animals are effected with physical manifestations
as well as with a concentration of toxins inside of their bodies to create cancers among other things.

I can recall childhood newscasts where a genetic mutation on an animal would be found at the Hanford site. There have been three eyed fish found in the river, radioactive mice, and others. These stories were told as amusements to the community – oddities that might make for fun dinner conversation. Perhaps this is why I have an interest with things in the natural world going awry.

There is still a current concern for the area as well. Highly radioactive waste is still buried in tanks at Hanford with documentation of the tanks leaking dating back to the 1950’s. Large amounts of contaminants have been traced in the soil and groundwater. It is suspected that the waste has reached the river – though reports vary. These ill affects and the greater purpose of the bombs creation have left their mark on the land and in the consciousness of the public.

The creation and detonation of the atom bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki permeated the global awareness of mass casualties on a previously unthinkable level. The massive amount of destruction incurred from the detonation of the bomb has hereafter affected our awareness of warfare and the complete obliteration and retransformation of matter. The atom bomb literally changes the formation of matter that it comes into contact with, turning ground into glass. The earth at the nuclear testing sites in Nevada and elsewhere becomes altered after the fact of the nuclear explosions. Nature is literally transformed from one material into another.

Inexplicably growing in a land left scarred by the bombs; fields of gorgeous wildflowers grow. Their presence is mysterious and fantastical, as they did not exist in
this land before. The detonation of the bomb seemingly provided the impetus for this form of life to grow. Amidst what seems like complete destruction new life is nurtured and persistent in its growth.

It is the aesthetics, beauty, and materiality of the nuclear explosions that is of interest over the scientific implications and reasoning. Selectively articulating the physical manifestations of the nuclear age and translating them into an artistic practice allows for a freedom of reflection and discovery.
CHAPTER 3: MYTHOLOGY

“Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the ‘beginnings.’ In other words, myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality – an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behavior, an institution. Myth, then, is always an account of a ‘creation’; it relates how something was produced, began to be. Myth tells only of that which really happened, which manifested itself completely. The actors in myths are Supernatural Beings. They are known primarily by what they did in the transcendent times of the ‘beginnings.’ Hence myths disclose their creative activity and reveal the sacredness (or simply the ‘supernaturalness’) of their works. In short, myths describe the various and sometimes dramatic breakthroughs of the sacred (or the ‘supernatural’) into the World. It is this sudden breakthrough of the sacred that really establishes the World and makes it what it is today. Furthermore, it is as a result of the intervention of Supernatural Beings that man himself is what he is today, a mortal, sexed, and cultural being (Eliade 1963).”

Myth is based in the history of a culture. It is used as a method in navigating the implications of historical events. Myth has the power to transform historical events and facts into an epic status, thereby taking them out of the realm of history and into the realm of fantasy. Is it possible that fact is transformed into fiction as a cultural coping mechanism? In making something mythical it reaches beyond us and transcends to the level of grandiosity. It goes beyond the scope of what human hands can construct and becomes a story of creation itself.

Myth is global. Every culture has a creation story or stories of how they and their surroundings came into existence. Giving thanks to the sustenance of people’s lives is a commonplace event most often relegated to the divinity of gods. Though these stories morph from culture to culture, an inordinate amount of common threads exist throughout.
Transcending time and physical distance, explanations more often concur with one another than not.

The study of myth is an interest in investigating different cultures stories of creation and constructing narratives for things that they found to be inexplicable. Our history as humans is to name, classify, construct and put into boxes – systematizing things to make them easier for our cognition and understanding. A Demilitarized Zone creates the perfect place to stage a meditation on a systematized construction and it’s effect on nature.

Our view of the world is shaped with the lenses that we create from which to view and make sense of it from. This is a key component in the work of Olafur Eliasson, who views nature through the lens of culture. In his sculptural installations he shows both the construction of a piece while also allowing the viewer to enter into the illusion that the piece creates.

A piece of particular interest is entitled Green River. This piece consists of a non-toxic bright green dye used by the navy to learn about ocean and water currents. By placing the dye in a body of water the navy studies and records these currents. Eliasson places the dye unannounced in a number of locations around the world. The irony of the piece resides in the fact that the dye looks as though it would be highly toxic and radioactive but is in fact nontoxic while the water that it is placed in looks clean but is in fact very polluted.

When Eliasson created this piece in Stockholm the newspaper ran a cover story that the governments cooling system had sprung a leak, trying to calm down the residents who were in a state of panic over their local river. When this piece was created in a river
in Los Angeles, the public paid it no mind and did not even seem to notice that their water supply had been tampered with. It is in this way that fact and fiction become intertwined and play off one another.

My interest in mythology stems from the transgression of historical events into myth. I theorize that this occurs not only for the purpose of creation stories in cultures but also when events are so ineffable that we are unable to ‘realize’ them. According to Joseph Campbell myths arise from collective experience. He theorizes that myths are created in ‘mythogenetic zones’ – an area in which people have roughly the same recurrent experiences and share the same cultural values (Brockway 1993). It is here that my interest in history and myth converging lies.

My interest lies specifically with the creation and detonation of the atomic bomb and the collective cultural experience incurred from the events that followed. While much of the information concerning the creation of the bombs has been released there is still a considerable amount that remains guarded. In this secrecy of the creation of the bomb – a sort of pre-history – as only a few know the actual events that transpired, that the story of the bomb becomes mythologized.

It is in the silence, mystery, and enormity of these events surrounding the bomb that they are given a reverence; a reverence of the sort that the creators of the bombs link with the enormity of the Christian religion. The first bomb test in Nevada was named the ‘Trinity’ test. After the detonation of the bomb Robert Oppenheimer (the father of the atomic bomb) proclaimed “Now, I am become death, destroyer of worlds” quoting the Bhagavad-Gita.
In creating my own mythology I find that the lack of a tangible human involvement in the DMZ lends the land to be one of fantasy. Is it possible that these ‘mythogenetic’ zones can also be linked to Demilitarized Zones? A space that is governed by a human boundary – one that we will not enter into for the sake of our lives; a place where creation stories can again emerge – stories that occur under the guise of warfare and nuclear testing.

While there is no physical human interaction in the DMZ it is still governed under the invisible fingerprint of nuclear testing. It has been exemplified that the government wants to take no negative or unforeseeable accountability over nuclear waste and its health effects. It is in this mythical DMZ that the implications of this warfare can be playfully explored. It is in the construction of life size animals constructed out of stuffed animal hides that this myth unfolds itself. This story is not complete in this one telling, but is of a nature that will unfold over time as currents of the cultural climate change.

Consider Proving Ground to be a millennium foundation myth for the atomic era.
CHAPTER 4: PROVING GROUND

The story of Proving Ground has not been written. Pieces of the story come to fruition based on imaginative interceptions in the current cultural climate. The story allows for a contemporary myth encapsulated within the confines of a Demilitarized Zone. The DMZ becomes a radioactive biosphere affecting the flora and fauna that naturally thrive in such a place, as they have escaped from the destructive hands of man. The invisible fallout from the nuclear testing and weapons production being developed in the civilizations on either side of the DMZ causes the species inside the zone to mutate.

The installation Proving Ground showcases a slice of time in the evolution of these species. One in which the cow has concentrated the poison in its milk and is passing on the damaged nourishment to others; the cow becomes a Trojan Horse and a complicit carrier of war to the others living in the land and reliant on the cow for sustenance.

In Proving Ground Romulus and Remus appear as a new species of animal – one of the first visible mutations in the DMZ. They look as though they could be cancerous blobs, complete with mouths to suckle the cow and fingernails for teeth. The characters of Romulus and Remus evidence the new rise to power – foreshadowing a future discordance in the brothers’ animosity and foundation of Rome on a fratricide with Romulus’ killing of Remus. In future works we will see the species continuing to evolve with new characters emerging. Romulus and Remus represent a new potential in a tumultuous land. They will continue to mutate and grow into a fuller form and develop a structure for social hierarchy. Over time the new mutations will overtake the older
species living in the land, causing extinctions and an empirical classification status of the creatures will emerge. The myth is incomplete in its telling as the animals are incomplete in their transformation.

Other artists also investigating aspects of creating one's own world is found in the work of Matthew Ritchie and Trenton Doyle Hancock. Ritchie's work, Proposition Player, theorizes the creation of the universe. He works in linguistics and sign symbols to show the progression of his work. Each time he installs his work it is a new piece of the puzzle that grows on the previous work. Though trained as a painter he does not limit himself as to materials and uses sculpture, drawing, and other media to convey his ideas.

The work of Ritchie and Hancock explores aspects of myth building and narrative in art. Hancock uses an imaginative narrative of the Mounds, a group of part animal and part plant creatures. He builds narratives with these characters that explore bible stories, race relations as well as the characters own development. Though Hancock's work is largely painting, most of the time these paintings move off the canvas and inhabit the walls of the gallery.

Ritchie and Hancock explore storytelling in their work with their own self-created worlds. The artists Kara Walker and Annette Messager also explore storytelling, but stories that are grounded in history. It is in the work of Walker and Messager that I find an interest in the exploration of individual and collective identity and history. The work of Kara Walker explores issues of slavery using the Victorian technique of paper silhouetting. Walker creates fantastical images on the walls of the gallery that also delve deep into the American consciousness by entering a dialogue with slavery.
Messager’s use of materials, particularly stuffed and real animals, was what first piqued my interest with her work. In her piece, *Them and Us, Us and Them*, she puts stuffed animal heads on the bodies of taxidermied animals. It is with these pieces that she embarks on an exploration of truth and the construction of perception. Messager also uses the grotesque, with the taxidermied animals, and the familiar to attract the viewer into the strange world that she has created.

These artistic influences have become part of my visual and conceptual community that, connected to cultural historical references with the atom bomb and Roman mythology, create a hyperreal world. The Roman myth of Romulus and Remus has also become of paramount importance for me. This myth is the foundation myth of Rome and the construction of this first empire. In most accounts of this myth of the twins Romulus kills his brother Remus and founds Rome on this fratricide. I compare this foundation myth of the first known empire to our own empire (of the United States) in order to reflect my own standing in the world by the creation of a new myth. A myth that’s rules are given by myself but are taken from current news media and contemporary issues to engage culturally and draw others by the freedom of a Demilitarized Zone to reflect in.
CHAPTER 5: MATERIALITY

I am interested in the play of use, function, and representation that animals have come to embody in our culture. Regarding the use of stuffed animals with children, we are taught as children that animals are here for our purposes. Animals become not represented and respected in their own right but are often animated with human qualities for entertainment purposes. We need only to look at all of the Disney characters or a slew of television shows on Nickelodeon to see the dopey properties inhabiting these representations of the real. Our early childhood experience imprints us with our dominion over animals and this ideology becomes manifest in later life through manipulation and compartmentalization. I explore this through representation and stuffed animals.

Stuffed animals are a representation of the real. For a child they become an animated object into which they place their love and affection. Stuffed animals are an almost universal part of our configuration as children. They become a constant companion in the arms of child and are given an unconditional love.

At some transitory point into adulthood these stuffed animals are forgotten about or only reflected upon with the sentimentality of childhood. They no longer carry the value and emotional investment that they once had. Often they become replaced with new toys; home entertainment systems, cars and other things that value and social standing are placed upon and can easily be shown to others. Stuffed animals become a surrogate for real animals – teaching children at a young age our superiority over this dominion. Animals become known as subservient to us and available for our use.
Though stuffed animals are companions to children and help fill what might be a void in a child’s life, these miniature creatures also condition children.

The genetic modification of animals further enunciates this point of using animals for our own purposes. Farm raised pigs are currently raised in isolation because their immune systems are so impoverished. They have virtually no immune system and are not capable of creating one due to the nature of their breeding – they are virtually all the same pig in different bodies with slight, if any, genetic variations.

Genetic modification also takes its place with the farming of animals in the laboratory to pursue the progress of scientific research. An example is the ear mouse – a lab test in which an ear made of a sort of scaffolding is grafted with human tissue onto the back of a mouse. The mouse’s body nurtures and grows cartilage on the scaffolding that will later be transplanted onto a human.

This experiment was exciting to scientists as in the future this technique can be used for ears, noses, and other tissues needed by humans.

The mutation of animals occurs both naturally and artificially: unforeseeable and intentional. Animals mutate on their own in order to adapt to a given environment or are intentionally altered for the benefit of man. With the fervent use of pesticides there is the constant threat of “superbugs” mutating and threatening to wipe out scores of crops.
In the development of genetically modified species, new animals, such as the ear mouse, are created that impart a sense of wonder. The European curiosity cabinets of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Cabinet 2005) were used to name, categorize, and give empirical structure to the natural world. "They were also the poor offspring of the fabulous Wunderkammern, or wonder chambers of the Renaissance, those immense collections of 'rare' objects, where the natural and the artificial – products of 'divine' and human craft, respectively – lived side-by-side as objects of amazements (Cabinet 2005)."

It is in this form of empirisizing information that I am interested in the natural history display. It is looking at nature through the lens of culture. Displaying Proving Ground as a natural history museum display plays with the idea of fact versus fiction and historically references the act of empirisizing information.

The scene is set with the life size animals on display – taxidermied with the hides of stuffed animals. The initial motive is in the spirit of play and innocence – one that could possibly disarm the viewer. Thoughts of "I don't get this" or the intimidation, which can preface art, dissolve as the materiality of the piece references back to our collective childhood.

The construction of the animals is a laborious process. Each life size animal takes months to complete. The papier-mâché must be built up onto the wire structure in layers to give the animals a muscle structure. The stuffed animals must be carefully taken apart at the seams in order to conserve material and are then placed on the life size animals as hides. The aspect of labor involved in this project stems from a work-obsessed culture. In many instances work comes before family and even creeps into vacation time with the need to constantly record events in photographs.
Deconstructing stuffed animals in order to reconstruct them into another likeness of an animal further elucidates the wonderment with representation. Literally turning the animal hides inside out – skinning them and initiating them into the animal kingdom for the use of their hides.

The photographs serve as documentation of this process of transfiguration of the material from stuffed animals to animal hide, to life size representation of an animal. The animal sculptures were chosen for their everydayness, so called non-exotic qualities and for the familiar. They allow us to see the familiar in an unfamiliar way.

While the photographs serve as potential portraits of the stuffed animals before they have metamorphosized into the life size animals, they are more representative of an evidence of this transfer. They are gutted and strung up as real animals would be to showcase their skins or while the hide is drying. The photographs show us that the transition has begun with the interplay of the children’s stuffed animals becoming life size animals. The stuffed animals in the photographs are life size, again emphasizing the alteration in materials and representation.

Roland Barthes writes on the fascination and indoctrinational uses of toys. “All the toys one commonly sees are essentially a microcosm of the adult world; they are all reduced copies of human objects, as if in the eyes of the public the child was, all told, nothing but a smaller man, a homunculus to whom must be supplies objects of his own size.... Toys always mean something, and this something is always entirely socialized, constituted by the myths or the techniques of modern adult life: the Army, Broadcasting, the Post Office, Medicine (miniature instrument-cases, operating theatres for dolls), School, Hair-Styling (driers for permanent-waving), the Air Force (Parachutists),
Transport (trains, Citroens, Vedettes, Vespas, petrol-stations), Science (Martian toys) (Barthes 1977)."

This brings up the work of Vik Muniz, in particular Toy Soldier from the ‘Monads’ series. Toy Soldier is a photograph of toy soldiers placed on a white backdrop in such a way that from afar a portrait of a child soldier comes into focus.

"Toys give the child the power to exercise creativity and control over situations outside his realm of influence. Toys help teach about love, responsibility, courage, ownership, family values, violence, justice, sex, death, and – most important of all – how to discern the factual from the fictional without placing greater importance on either one. We live for play; we play to live (Muniz 2004)."
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

*Proving Ground* is a meditation reflecting back onto my own personal history and tying in bits and pieces of the collective history of our culture. Through this process I explore the transformative nature of history and its evolution into storytelling and mythmaking. With the evolution of my own myth I have created a biosphere that, though seemingly isolated, is still very much connected to our contemporary issues and crises.

*Proving Ground* is a reflection and manifestation of my own place in the world. At times decisions involving the story are consciously made, though to a large extent they become manifest as natural apparitions in my own mind. It is in this way that influences have become more democratic and equalized in their presentation to be exhibited in the myth.

*Proving Ground* is evolution. As the millennium myth for the atomic era most of the story remains to be told. As nuclear threats are fielded, insights are gained pertaining to man's interaction with and value placed on the world. Creating a fantastical reality that is imbued with its own sense of place and boundary along with effects of its neighboring occupants is telling of how globalization can cease to recognize borders and persistently illicit change.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Brockway, Robert W. Myth from the Ice Age to Mickey Mouse. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993


